

BUILDING LEADERSHIP SKILLS WITH EVALUATION TECHNIQUES*

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NOTE: This Instructional Module has been reviewed and accepted as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. In addition to publication in the Connexions Content Commons, this module is published in the International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation,¹ and catalogued under Instructional Modules and Education Material. The module is also submitted to the Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC).

1 Introduction

The career of educational administrator does not lend itself well to allowing new principals to practice their skills. As individuals are involved in principal preparation programs, the internship experience is the platform used by the professors as the main source of practicing necessary leadership skills. Because of the element of responsibility for administrators, most principals are reluctant to relinquish power to interns in fear of their failure. As a result, educational leadership programs struggle to find appropriate methods of instruction to fill the gaps in the practice field. "A practice is an activity that you do repeatedly to achieve a particular experience or outcome (Creighton, 2005, p. 67)." The outcome all programs are hoping to achieve is successful leadership skills, which can be incorporated into a new administrator's career seamlessly. Altering classroom projects to include additional collaboration and evaluation techniques is a practice designed to improve skills necessary for effective administrators.

2 Working Alone is Not an Option

Many educators teach their entire career in solitude. By this I mean, they teach in their own classroom, making their own teaching decisions, monitoring their own students; all without the intrusion of other teachers. Besides the brief amount of time administrators and supervisors spend in the classroom observing and evaluating, little time is shared with other professional educators. This seclusion leads educators to

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habits not productive for administrators. Just as teachers are responsible for all work within the classroom; administrators are responsible for overseeing the work within a school. The main difference is the allocation or assignment of work to other school members with the expectation of competently completing tasks. Because teachers do not share responsibilities in most teaching situations, a new administrator leaving the teaching profession for an administrative position is likely to have difficulty with delegating work.

This has been my experience as a new administrator. As an educator who had little experience in leadership except with students, it has been difficult stepping into an administrative position in which I must rely on others to complete tasks. My personality and work ethic motivated me to take on most responsibilities and delegate minimally at the beginning of my administrative career. I soon realized this was not productive for my organization. Not only did it overwork me, but it made my subordinates feel inferior and unimportant. I believe a school, or any other organization, succeeds as a team or fails as a team. New administrators need to be prepared to delegate appropriately and find ways for everyone to work toward a common goal.

3 Are Leadership Programs Preparing Administrators For Distributed Leadership?

Principal preparation programs at many universities have established the foundation of making this process a learned behavior; however, there is much more work needed to achieve competence in delegating. As my cohort has worked together for the past two years, we have had group projects with assigned group leaders. In my experience, these group leaders complete basic organizational tasks but do not delegate responsibilities. Although someone is given the role of leader, all group members feel the same pressure to succeed; therefore, the group works as a team instead of as a leader/subordinate group. I have been in two groups with a leader who did not challenge the team to succeed. Because of the shared responsibility, other group members and I would work diligently despite the lack of leadership from the assigned leader. As our group prepared and presented our material, it was never obvious to the rest of the class or the professors that we have completed the work while the leader did little. This will not be a likely situation as an administrator. Typically, if an administrator does not work toward the goal, the subordinates will not be motivated either.

So many times, we are asked, “What would you do?” This question needs to change to include “okay, now what would your subordinates do?” Students of educational leadership focus on the big picture and ways to create solutions. No administrator can do everything. They must rely on their team of educational experts, including teachers, staff, and other stakeholders, to accomplish the goals. An ongoing practice must occur for future administrators to learn the skills necessary to delegate. All activities and discussions should revolve around the practice of deciding who the leader is, what each person’s responsibility should be, and how can the team work effectively to reach a common goal.

4 The Practice Field—Nobody is Fired Because We Are Learning

A better practice for group activities would be for an evaluation of the delegation procedures and leadership abilities. Because we are all involved in the program to learn how to be effective school leaders, this evaluation could occur in several forms. In the beginning of the Educational Leadership program, it should not be expected that group leaders will be able to delegate appropriately. Using an approach that I call “The Apprentice” approach could help strengthen leadership skills. After each group presentation, subordinates should be asked to provide their thoughts about the leadership skills of the group leader. The approach should include asking each member to evaluate verbally the strengths and weaknesses of the leader. There should be an understanding that this process is to improve leadership and delegation skills with constructive criticism. Professors could complete this evaluation in small groups to make the members feel less intimidated than being critical in front of the entire class. Goal setting is important for the group as well. Because the desired outcome is to improve leadership skills, the group leader should establish goals to improve by using the input from their colleagues.

5 Say it the Right Way to Get the Result You Desire

“Teacher evaluation can especially influence change in the classroom for good or ill (Zemelman, Harvey, & Arthur, 2005, p. 275).” Young administrators need to learn the skill of delivering constructive criticism to other educational professionals. Most people who are being evaluated by a supervisor and receive constructive criticism, interpret the conversation as “something is wrong with me.” As a new administrator, a critical skill is to learn how to deliver constructive criticism to colleagues or subordinates in such a manner that they understand the critique as a method to improve behavior. “Teacher evaluation as a dialogue, goal setting by teachers, recognition that new strategies may not go perfectly the first time—all set the stage for change to flourish (Zemelman, Harvey, & Arthur, 2005, p. 275). Understanding critical statements are not an attack on the individual is important to maintain morale throughout the school.

6 Criticism—Listen! What Does it Really Mean?

I have always welcomed constructive criticism and viewed it as a means to improve my leadership. As future leaders, all of my classmates will face many forms of criticism. Not only would this practice of evaluation prepare us to delegate more effectively, it would prepare us to accept criticism as well. Being able to internalize criticisms to improve leadership is vital to the practice field activity. “Only through listening do we get further into the multiple layers of reality (Creighton, 2005, p. 71).” All effective administrators learn from listening to others. This type of constant practice would allow each learner to listen to criticisms to produce positive leadership outcomes.

7 Evaluation Does Not Mean Observation—It Mean Finding Ways to Improve

Another benefit of this practice field is learning to evaluate. Teachers are accustomed to evaluating students but not other professionals. “Of all the tasks that principals perform, teacher evaluation is often done the least well (Hoerr, 2005, p. 87). If every class contains practice of evaluation, future administrators will learn how to provide guidance and assistance to members of their cohort. With everyone working as a team to learn as much as possible about effective leadership, evaluating each other and providing guided practice should help prepare for the role of evaluator after entering the administrative career. “Helping teachers grow is not usually considered a part of the teacher evaluation process (Hoerr, 2005, p. 91). This is a failure of the administrative process. It could be counteracted if new educational leaders possess a unique skill set focusing of improving teacher performance with a team approach.

8 Take a Close Look in the Mirror

Self-reflection is one of the skills I believe is the most important for any leader. Each group leader should prepare a self-reflection before and after hearing from their subordinates. This should be guided by specific questions from the professor because teachers are rarely given an opportunity to self-reflect. For many, it will be an assignment they have never done before. These self-reflections should be maintained as part of the internship log or as a journal. This would allow each individual to have one allocated place dedicated to evaluating their own learning of delegation, leading, and self-reflection. These are the building blocks to creating an effective school leader. After a two year experience in the Educational Leadership program and many group projects, everyone should have a list of characteristics which make an effective leader and characteristics or poor habits which should be avoided. Martin (2007) states, “the player who lacks a plan and a structure is likely to develop bad habits and make inconsistent shots (p. 182).” As the cohort works together with the goal of improving poor behaviors, the bad habits are less likely to remain as each member learns from constant evaluation and encouragement from classmates.

9 Conclusion

“The real strength of leadership practice fields is that they provide an opportunity (perhaps more authentic) for perspective school leaders to practice an actual task from the school administrator’s day (Creighton, p. 8).” There is no perfect solution to the lack of administrative practice for new principals; however, it is possible to improve educational programs with brief practice activities. By conducting this practice, graduates will be better prepared to delegate work appropriately, evaluate subordinates in a proper manner, self-reflect to continually improve skills, and involve others to achieve a unified goal.

10 References

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